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Charting the Census Count on the Way to our Woodsian Future

Chester Smolski

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Charting the census count on the way to our Woodsian future

Our country is a wonderful example of the world in miniature. Because of our generous immigration policy which allows approximately one million persons to enter the country each year and to come from almost any country in the world, it is not necessary to go out in search of different people and cultures for almost all are to be found here. Whether one talks of the Hispanics and Native Americans of the Southwest, the AfroAmericans of the South, the Asians of Hawaii, the whites of the North or the more than 120 national groups found in the Elmhurst neighborhood of the Queens borough in New York City, ours is a nation of great diversity, whether these people are found in regions or in a neighborhood.

Keeping track of all these people is a most difficult task, especially when one tries to differentiate on the basis of race. Yet the government is bound legislatively, administratively and by programs to do exactly that.

The two-fold goal of the census is to count the population to determine the distribution of our political representatives in Congress and to determine the allocation of dollars for federal programs, many of which are based on race or ethnicity.

Because of the diversity within our population, it is becoming more difficult to place people into categories for which government funding is mandated. This is especially true with classifications of race.

Race is defined as a "group

of people distinguished by inherited physical characteristics," such as skin color, hair type, facial structure, etc. Since offspring of interracial marriages may carry characteristics of two or more racial groups, it becomes difficult to classify people in such ways, and even some anthropologists are questioning the adequacy of such a classification. Yet if falls on the federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to devise a system to categorize such diverse people, a difficult assignment.

The four race classification used in 1980 and 1990 was a result of OMB Directive Number 15, "Race and Ethnic Standards for Federal Statistics and Administrative Reporting" issued in 1977. The four races were American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian or Pacific Islander, Black or White, with a fifth choice of Other.

The new 1997 OMB directive, to be fully implemented by 2003, now provides a choice of the five racial groups which appeared in Census 2000. American Indian

or Alaska Native; Asian; Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, Black or White, with a sixth choice of Some other race. The two ethnic questions were Hispanic or Latino and Non-Hispanic or Latino. And for the first time in history, respondents will be able to report more than one racial group, causing data presentation to report persons with "two or more races."

This last point reflects not only our increasingly diverse society but the fact that it is also becoming multiracial. Consider that the 28 percent of our 1999 minority population will increase to 47 percent by 2050, and from 1970 to 1998, the number of interracial or "out-marriages" rose from 300,000 to 1.4 million.

When Tiger Woods describes his ancestry as Caublasin, i.e., Caucasian, Black, Asian and Indian, he demonstrates what the future likely holds when more of us become members of the human race rather than some division of it.

Chester E. Smolski is a retired professor of Geography at Rhode Island College.